

The Role of Commodities and Natural Resources in Fueling Conflict *Disarmament and International Security (DISEC)*

//BACKGROUND GUIDE//

Natural resources play a huge role in creating and prolonging conflict in the world. In the past 60 years, at least 40% of civil wars have been tied to natural resources.¹³ Almost a third of UN peacekeeping operations over the past 20 years have been related to conflicts prolonged because of revenues from natural resources.¹⁴ The United Nations has a duty to prevent and ameliorate conflict; therefore examining the role of commodities and natural resources in conflicts is an essential one that could more quickly resolve many conflicts around the world.

There are many commodities and natural resources over which different nations and organizations fight, but some of the most common include diamonds, conflict minerals, water, drugs, and oil. The Global Policy Forum defines conflict resources as “natural resources whose systematic exploitation and trade in a context of conflict contribute to, benefit from or result in the commission of serious violations of human rights, violations of international humanitarian law or violations amounting to crimes under international law.”¹⁵ No matter which of these resources and commodities are being fought over, the issue remains the same: control over the resource and therefore the revenue stream derived from the resource. This means that commodities and resources fund whichever forces control them.¹⁶

While some resources may be considered more than others, there are many natural resources which have been directly tied to conflict. One such situation is the Taliban control of opium in Afghanistan. The United Nations believes that the Taliban derives much of its budget from the narcotics trade in Afghanistan¹⁷ and that the Taliban has taken control of large opium producing regions for this purpose. Another highly lucrative resource is diamonds. Known as conflict diamonds or blood diamonds, this multi-billion dollar trade has provided funds to purchase arms for warlords and rebels in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.¹⁸ The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, however, has been successful in addressing this issue, as well as Security Council sanctions on UNITA in Angola, the RUF in Sierra Leone, and Liberia for its support of the RUF.¹⁹ A number of UN resolutions have been particularly effective including S/RES/1689, S/RES/1647, S/RES/1343, and S/RES/1521 which impose bans on diamonds from Liberia; S/RES/1643 which imposes prohibition on the import of diamonds from Côte d'Ivoire; S/RES/1306 and S/RES/1171 which imposed embargoes on Sierra Leone; S/RES/1295 and S/RES/1173 which prohibit import of diamonds from Angola not controlled by the government; and finally S/RES/1459 which officially endorsed the Kimberley Process.

Conflict diamonds are not the only material states have tried to limit the sale of within their borders. Conflict minerals, namely tantalum, tungsten, tin, or gold mined from ore, which are extracted in the Democratic Republic of Congo and its surrounding countries, are intimately tied to the long civil war in the DRC.²⁰ These minerals can be found in mobile phones, electronics, light bulbs, balloons, and even jewelry commonly sold throughout the world.²¹ While civil penalties have been brought against companies that do not remove conflict minerals from their supply lines, the process is surprisingly difficult and involves collecting data from processing centers across the world.²²

Oil is one of the most discussed natural resources in conflict. The most famous oil conflicts are in the Middle East, but conflicts involving oil are prevalent in the Niger Delta, southern Thailand, Algeria, Colombia, Sudan, Iraq, and Kuwait.²³ Oil production can be highly lucrative, so governments and rebels alike are liable to vie for control of its production and sale.

Water, as one can imagine, is also a highly valuable commodity. About three fifths of all water flowing in rivers is shared by two or more countries; disputes can arise quickly in such an environment.²⁴ A recent, highly publicized incident involved Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Ethiopia planned to build Africa's largest hydroelectric dam but Egypt opposed the project citing concerns that it would worsen water shortages in Egypt. While Egypt stopped short of threatening war, the threat was implied.²⁵ Finally in March of 2015 the leaders of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia signed a deal to end the dispute, avoiding an armed conflict.²⁶

The United Nations has passed several resolutions on the role of natural resources in conflict, including S/RES/1625. In this resolution Article 6 states that the Security Council “[reaffirms] its determination to take action against illegal exploitation and trafficking of natural resources and high-value commodities in areas where it contributes to the outbreak, escalation or continuation of armed conflict.”²⁷ Another resolution, S/RES/1653 (2006), begins by expressing the Security Council’s awareness of the “link between the illegal exploitation of natural resources, the illicit trade in those resources and the proliferation and trafficking of arms is one of the factors fuelling and exacerbating conflicts in the Great Lakes region of Africa, and especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo” and goes on to call upon the countries of the African Great Lakes region to “combat cross-border trafficking of illicit small arms, light weapons and illicit natural resources.”²⁸

Natural resources and commodities can provide a revenue stream to fund armies and governments, making them incredibly valuable. This value causes a great deal of conflict, where civilians might be caught in the fighting between forces vying for control of this revenue streams. The United Nations must continue to examine the ways in which natural resources and commodities effect and prolong conflicts in order to resolve them more quickly.

Questions to consider

- How does the control and trade of commodities shape international and domestic conflict?
 - Is your state a major exporter of any natural resource? If so, which resource(s)?
 - Which entities/states are most heavily involved in commerce with your state with regards to those natural resources?
 - How has your state regulated the extraction and export of natural resources as commodities?
 - What are the environmental, social, political, and economic consequences of such actions?
 - Has your country experienced any conflict fueled by natural resources?
 - Conflict can be internal (domestic) and/or external (international), be inclusive.
 - Natural resources are not necessary limited to being just fossil fuels, other sources of natural resource that may apply to your state are precious metals and gems, water, greenland, and animals
 - Have there been any successful mechanisms created that can be replicated for other commodities?
 - With this, brainstorm resolution-based ideas that shift from nonrenewable to renewable sources of energy, if applicable for your state.
 - If energy-related natural resources do not apply to your state, think of general beneficial movements that can be promoted by the UN General Assembly.
 - In what ways can the United Nations address national and international conflict tied to natural resources?
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Reference

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